Precautions With Snakes

Snakes are important members of the natural world and make a significant contribution to the control of pests such as rats, insects, and other snakes. Poisonous snakes, however, are not desirable members of the human habitat. The risk of a poisonous snakebite is lower than that of being struck by lightening and can be reduced further by:

- Cleaning up refuse and other hiding spots around buildings and yards;
- Wearing heavy shoes and pants in wooded areas; and
- Looking first before stepping or touching hidden areas where snakes are likely to be resting or hiding.

Most poisonous snakes in the United States belong to the pit viper group. The pit viper has pits on its head, vertical pupils, a triangular head, slim neck, and a heavy body with a single row of scales on the underside of the tail. The pit viper group includes the major categories of copperhead and cottonmouth and two major categories of rattlesnake. All pit vipers may vibrate their tail sections rapidly to make noise when threatened.

The cottonmouth and copperhead categories are often referred to as mocassins, but they are two distinct categories within the pit viper group. **Note:** **Click Images For Larger View**

Rattlesnake

There are many varieties of rattlesnakes that have pit viper characteristics and a button on the tail (youngest snakes), plus two to four segments of rattles for each year of age. The size range of rattlesnakes is 15 to 72 inches, with the record size held by a 96-inch Eastern Diamondback.

Copperhead

The five varieties of copperhead snakes have pit viper characteristics and bands or hourglass markings of brown, copper, or red on a tan body. The 20- to 36-inch snakes have regional differences in color and size; the young have a bright-yellow tail tip. An unusually large copperhead was recorded at 56 inches in length.

Cottonmouth

The semiaquatic cottonmouth also has pit viper characteristics, but the adult has a solid-colored upper body that is olive brown or black, and a lighter underside. Although often difficult to distinguish from the nonpoisonous water snake, a cottonmouth is usually more aggressive.

While a water snake will leave rapidly when threatened, the pit viper often raises its head and confronts an enemy with a show of fangs inside a cotton-white mouth. The size of the cottonmouth ranges from 30 to 48 inches, with a record length of 74 inches.

Coral Snake

The coral snake is an exception to the other snakes of the United States, because it has round pupils and an elliptical head, but it is quite poisonous. While the pit viper venom reduces the amount of oxygen carried by a victim's red blood cells, a coral snake has venom that rapidly affects the nervous system. The small mouth of the coral snake has trouble grasping and biting the larger human; however, the effect is more deadly than the pit viper once a bite is accomplished!

Pit Vipers	Other Snakes
Flat triangular head	Usually oval, elongated head
Facial pit; vertical pupil	No pit; round pupil
Single row of scales under end of tail	**Double** row of scales under end of tail

If You Are Bitten By A Snake

1. If the snake is still in the area, do not attempt to kill or catch it, unless it poses a danger to you or the victim. Try to remember what it looks like so you can identify the type of snake from pictures in the emergency room.
2. Remove all items that may restrict circulation in the affected extremity. Watches, bracelets, rings, gloves, or shoes may pose a problem as the bite area swells.
3. Immobilize the affected area as much as possible. Attempt to keep the bite at or slightly below the level of the head.
4. If swelling occurs **rapidly**, place a 1-inch-wide constricting band about 2 inches above the bite. This is not a tourniquet and should not fit so tightly you cannot easily slip a finger under it. **Do not** place a constricting band on a joint.
5. Attempt to keep the victim from moving rapidly about while transporting him/her to the nearest emergency medical facility as quickly as possible.
6. **Note:**

    a. Do not Give the victim anything to eat or drink, particularly alcohol;
    b. Do not Place the affected area in ice;
    c. Do not Make any cuts or apply suction to the area;
    d. Do not Attempt to give antivenom; or
    e. Do not Administer pain or anti-anxiety medications

For assistance, call the Regional Poison Control Center at (601) 354-7660.

Safety Precautions With Snakes

After a flood, storms, or hurricane, snakes are forced into places where they usually are not found. Take the following precautions if you live in an area where poisonous snakes are common.

1. Know how to identify poisonous snakes common to your area.
2. Be alert for snakes in unusual places. They may be found in or around homes, barns, outbuildings, driftwood, levees, dikes, dams, stalled automobiles, piles of debris, building materials, trash, or any type of rubble or shelter.
3. Keep a heavy stick or some other weapon handy.
4. Search the premises thoroughly for snakes before beginning any cleanup or rescue operations. Snakes may be under or near any type of protective cover.
5. In rescue or cleanup operations, wear heavy leather or rubber high-topped boots, and heavy gloves. Wear trouser legs outside boots. Be extremely careful around debris. Use rakes, pry bars, or other long-handled tools when removing debris. Never expose your hands, feet, or other parts of your body in a place where a snake might hide.
6. Carry a strong light after dark.
7. Explain to children the dangers of snakes under storm or flood conditions, and the precautions they should follow. Do not allow children to play around debris.
8. If you kill a poisonous snake, use a stick, rake, or other long-handled tool to carry the snake away for disposal. Snakes may bite even when they appear dead.
9. If you realize you are near a snake, avoid sudden movement, which may cause the snake to strike. If you remain still the snake may leave. If the snake doesn't move away from you slowly back away from it.
10. If someone is bitten by a poisonous snake, call a doctor immediately.

Controlling Snakes

To get rid of snakes in buildings and to prevent other snakes from entering:

1. Remove snakes' food supply. Eliminating rats and mice from an area often discourages snakes.
2. Remove snakes' hiding places. Get rid of lumber piles, trash piles, high weeds and grasses, and debris.
3. Block openings where snakes might enter buildings. Snakes can pass through extremely small openings and usually enter near or below ground level. Be sure doors, windows, and screens fit tightly. Search walls and floors for holes or crevices. Inspect the masonry of foundations, fireplaces, and chimneys; plug or cement cracks. Plug spaces around pipes that go through outside walls. Fasten galvanized screen over drains or ventilators, or over large areas of loose construction.

There are no sprays, dusts, or poisons that have legal registration for use around homes or farms to repel or kill snakes.

Low places under houses are likely to trap water, which provides a harborage for water moccasins. Outdoor sheds and barns are also ideal places for snakes to hide. These areas should be drained if possible.

Rodents

Homeowners returning to areas inundated by floodwaters are likely to encounter infestations of insects, rodents, snakes, and other pests that can cause numerous health problems for humans and livestock.

Rats and other rodents may move into homes and outbuildings to escape floodwaters. Search likely harboring places in your home and farm buildings. Carry a flashlight and approach closets, basements, storage areas, stairwells, bins, and shelves cautiously.

Do not endanger yourself. Guard against rat bites. If you are bitten by a rodent, try to capture or kill it, and take it immediately to a health authority to check for rabies. You may need medical treatment.

Rats that cannot be eliminated by clubbing or trapping, destroy by poisoning. Zinc Phosphide is a rat poison to use if there is no danger of small children or pets contacting them. This material kill rats quickly. The anticoagulant poisons (warfarin, pival, fumarin, and diphacinone) are safer to use around small children and pets, but require at least four days of successive feeding before the rats begin to die. Death of rats continues for two weeks or longer after consuming bait.

After the infestation is controlled, conduct a careful cleanup program. Remove trash piles, and avoid piling up lumber, trash, or damaged furniture or equipment on the ground. Store materials on platforms or shelves 12-18 inches above the ground. Make every effort to deprive the rats of food, food scraps, hiding places, or harborage. Clear outdoor harborages after rats are under control--never before--since rats may be driven into the house for refuge. It's also easier to choose proper places to put bait before cleanup.

Clean up piles of garbage and debris both indoors and outdoors, and cover garbage cans tightly. Store foods in glass or metal containers in cupboards. Set traps and poisons in strategic locations, and maintain them even after you have stopped an infestation. Dispose of dead rodents as you would livestock carcasses.

Pest Control

Use the following preventive measures, and apply pesticides if necessary. Do not overreact to emergency conditions, however.

Note: Use pesticides only in the areas and amounts specified on the labels. Keep them out of the reach of children, pets, and livestock.

Insects

Insects multiply rapidly because post-flood conditions provide many favorable breeding sites. Mosquito, fly, and other insect outbreaks can reach alarming rates quickly.

Avoid potential health problems by eliminating breeding spots. Cesspools, cisterns, trash containers, and rain barrels should be covered. Drain standing puddles, marshes, and containers filled with water. Use insecticides to treat standing water and sanitation pits. Dispose of garbage and animal carcasses as recommended. If you use manure as fertilizer, spread it thinly so that it dries quickly.

Repair or replace damaged screens, windows, doors, and vents that allow insects to enter your home and farm buildings.

Use household sprays indoors and apply an insecticide to window screens. In heavily infected areas, use commercial outdoor sprays, and wear protective clothing and insect repellant. An insecticide supplier can recommend chemicals and application procedures.